



Ravoux's Cafe, in the French village of Auvers-sur-Oise, was where Vincent van Gogh spent his final days.

The life and death of Vincent van Gogh

Touring Auvers-sur-Oise, a town of painters

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On the evening of July 27, 1890, Vincent van Gogh staggered to his tiny attic room over Ravoux's Cafe in the French village of Auvers-sur-Oise.

The landlady, Mrs. Ravoux, asked him, "Are you all right, Monsieur Vincent?" He replied, "I think I've botched it." With a borrowed pistol "to scare away the crows that bothered him while he painted" he had clumsily shot himself in the stomach in a field above the town. Vincent, who considered himself a failure at everything in life, assumed that he had failed at his own suicide.

Van Gogh's younger brother Theo, who had supported him financially and spiritually throughout his 10 years as an aspiring artist, was called from his home in Paris, 30 kilometers away. Theo arrived by train the next day and stayed with Vincent until the early hours of July 29 when Vincent asked for his pipe, smoked a while, and then peacefully passed away. Later that day Theo and Vincent's few friends, including the

*Photos by
Martin LePire*

painters Emile Bernard and Camille Pissarro, carried Vincent's coffin from the inn to the cemetery in the wheat fields above the village. There, the unknown 37-year-old Dutchman was laid to rest. It would be decades before his name became synonymous with great art.

Vincent van Gogh had arrived in this small French village on the outskirts of Paris only 70 days previously. He spent the previous 16 months in a mental hospital at Saint-Remy in southern France after his infamous ear-cutting incident. (FYI: He did not cut off his entire ear, only a bit of the earlobe. It was the left ear, not the right one as it appears in the paintings. He was painting his self-portrait by looking in a mirror, so the image is reversed. But it is true that he gave the severed earlobe to a local prostitute, a young girl named Rachel.) Theo

thought it would be best for Vincent to get away from the "heat and the turbulent weather" of southern France where he had been painting for the past two years, first in Arles and then while in the mental hospital.

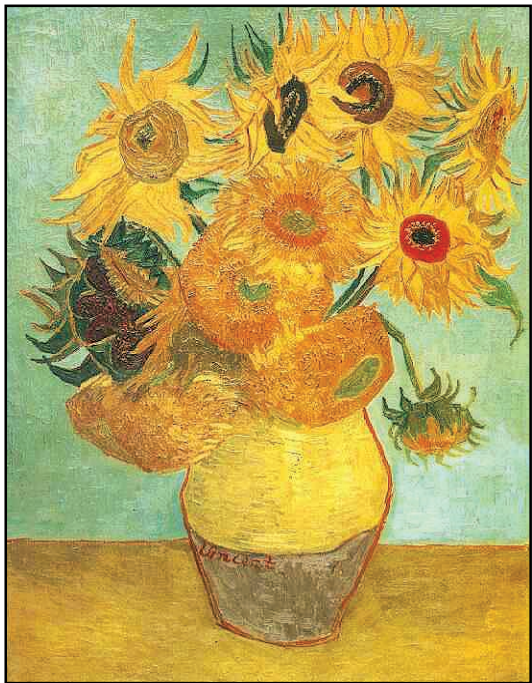
Auvers-sur-Oise was an ideal town for Vincent. It was home to a number of painters and many

others visited there to work. A local doctor, Paul Gachet, was an admirer and friend to these modern artists and an expert in nervous disorders. He would become Vincent's doctor, friend and the subject of one of his finest paintings.

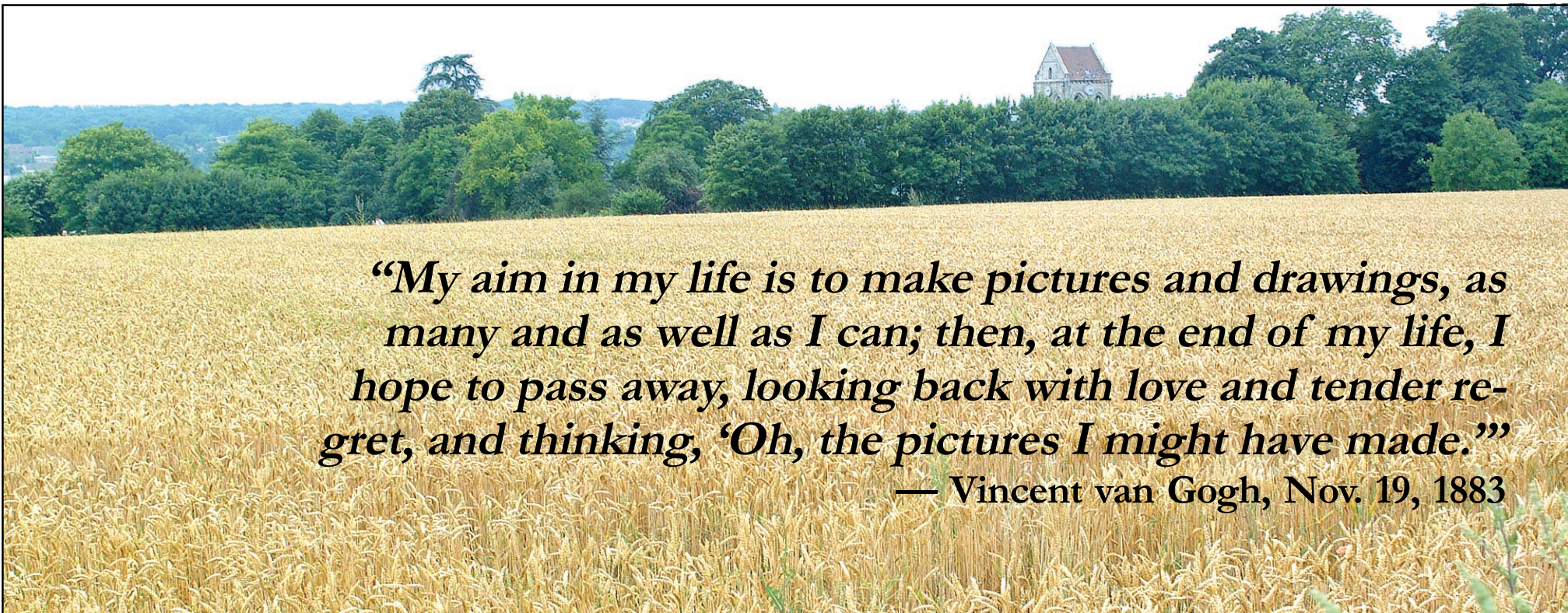
In those 70 days Vincent van Gogh, then at the height of his artistic skills, produced over 70 oil canvasses and numerous drawings. Some of his most famous paintings were produced in the streets and fields around Auvers just days before his death. The *Portrait of Dr. Gachet*, *The Church at Auvers* and *Wheatfield with Crows* are among his most famous works.

Today fans of Vincent van Gogh flock to this small village outside of Paris to walk the streets, and visit the sites where Vincent painted and his grave. Throughout Auvers you will find signs depicting a famous painting and describing the artist and the work. These signs are set up on the exact spots where he painted that work. You can compare the view to the painting. In many places the view has changed very little. You'll see the same rooftops, hills and trees that van Gogh, Pissarro and Cezanne painted.

Auvers has been inhabited as far



Vincent's sunflowers



"My aim in my life is to make pictures and drawings, as many and as well as I can; then, at the end of my life, I hope to pass away, looking back with love and tender regret, and thinking, 'Oh, the pictures I might have made.'"
— Vincent van Gogh, Nov. 19, 1883



Top photo: Wheat fields, the subject of many of van Gogh's last paintings, surround the cemetery where Vincent and his brother, Theo, are buried. Above left: The graves of Vincent and Theo lie side by side. Above right: Ravoux's Cafe where Vincent lived his final days.



"Painting is a world in itself."

Vincent van Gogh in Auvers-sur-Oise

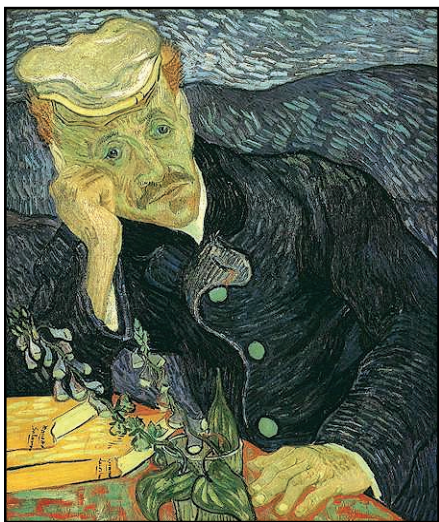
back as the Bronze Age. Through the centuries the town was involved in many historic battles from the 9th century Norman invasion and the Hundred Years War to the religious wars of the 16th century. In the 1800s painters came to the town seeking a pastoral spot to work. Charles-Francois Daubigny (1818-1878) arrived in 1854 and was soon joined by the painters Corot and Daumier. (Van Gogh greatly admired Daumier's work.) Paul Cezanne lived in Auvers for 18 months between 1872 and 1874. Others, such as Camille Pissarro and Henri Rousseau, came to paint along the scenic river.

Auvers lies on the banks of the River Oise between Pontoise and Butry, about 30 kilometers from Paris. It is easy to reach by car and reasonably easy by train from Paris. Trains leave the Gare du Nord or Gare St. Lazare and you will have to change at Pontoise. It will take a couple hours on the train, with the changes, but the trip is worth the effort. From the train station, walk toward the main street and across the street you'll see the first of the directional signs in front of a fence. This is Daubigny's house and the sign depicts van Gogh's painting, *Daubigny's Garden*. Go left along the street and you'll pass a small park with a statue of

van Gogh. Continue into the village center and you'll find Ravoux's Cafe on the right. It now houses a museum called the Maison de Van Gogh. There you can visit the tiny attic room where Vincent died, watch a multi-media presentation and eat a meal at the cafe where van Gogh lived. The museum and the nearby tourist information office will provide you with a map so that you can walk all around the town and visit the spots where van Gogh and others painted some of their greatest works.

Best of Auvers-sur-Oise

To see everything in the town is an all-day trip, but the must-see site in Auvers is Ravoux's Cafe where Vincent lived and died. Have a look across the street at the city hall. It was a subject of van Gogh's and is now decorated with the same colorful flags depicted in the painting. Dr. Gachet's house is today a museum and you can visit the doctor's home and the garden where so



Vincent's painting of Dr. Gachet

many famous painters worked. (FYI — Dr. Gachet is buried in the famous Parisian cemetery, Pere Lachaise, but I couldn't find his tomb although it's listed on the cemetery map.) The 11th-century church in Auvers was also a subject for van Gogh, and some experts believe it may have been his last painting. Follow the signs to the church and then through the fields to the cemetery. Just six months after Vincent's death, his brother Theo died in Holland. Art historians believe the years of emotional and financial strain imposed upon him by Vincent ruined his health and led to his early death. Theo, it might be said, gave his life for Vincent's artwork. In 1914 Theo's body was moved to Auvers to rest beside

Vincent.

Vincent van Gogh websites

www.auvers-sur-oise.com — The English version of the town's official website doesn't seem to work and it appears to be aimed more toward the local citizens than art-crazed tourists.

www.vangoghgallery.com — This site displays 100 percent of Vincent van Gogh's works and letters and is endorsed by the Van Gogh Museum staff in Amsterdam.

www.vangoghmuseum.nl — The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. The site is also in English.